



## FORT PITT

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### The Forgotten Survivors of Gnadenhutzen

With the 1781 defeat of the British forces at Yorktown, the American Revolution began winding down in the East. On the frontier of Western Pennsylvania however, armed conflict continued on and off for more than a decade as two cultures clashed for control and survival. One of the darkest days in this struggle came on March 9, 1782, when militiamen from Washington County, Pennsylvania, massacred what is believed to have been 90 Indians, mostly Lenape-speaking Christian converts, men, women, and children.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, while murdered by American soldiers, these same Indians had been forcibly removed from their villages in Eastern Ohio a few months earlier by British forces for their suspected loyalty to the American cause. They had only returned briefly to recover what they could of their crops and supplies left behind in their old homes, as they were practically starving at their new British-enforced residence near Upper Sandusky, in Northwest Ohio.

The militiamen, led by Captain David Williamson, were in the region seeking hostile Indians who had been raiding the frontier. Late that winter, fate placed them all near the abandoned Moravian mission town of Gnadenhutzen. At first, the Indians were

led to believe the troops were their friends and rescuers. Many hoped the militiamen might take them to safety at Fort Pitt, but the Indians soon discovered the truth. Once gathered, the Indians were disarmed and confined as prisoners. They were accused of either being active participants in warfare, or at a minimum, of harboring and supporting those who were. Many of the militiamen had lost friends or family in frontier conflicts, some quite recently. In a bizarre form of frontier democracy, a vote was taken among the whites as to their next action, and those seeking blood overwhelmingly dominated. In the seemingly endless cycle of violence on both sides, deaths would be avenged with fresh bloodshed that would no doubt trigger the aggrieved to strike as well in revenge. The guilt or innocence of the slain rarely mattered—only their race and proximity.<sup>2</sup>

They forced the Indian men into one cabin, the women and children in another. As some of the Christian Indians began to pray and sing hymns, their executioners stepped forward and began the slaughter with a wooden cooper's mallet. Nathan Rollins was described by one eyewitness as taking "the lead in murdering the Indians." After dispatching 19 of them, he was alleged to have sat down crying and (possibly out of remorse) exclaimed, "it was no satisfaction for the loss of his father & uncle after all." When the grisly task was complete, the cabins were set on fire.<sup>3</sup>

Only two Indians were said to have survived the massacre. One, a teenager named Thomas, had been struck down and scalped, but lived. He regained his wits and later sneaked away from the scene of the massacre, undetected. In the cabin holding the women and children, a widow named Judith managed to pry up a floorboard and deposit two more boys into a root cellar below. They stayed there while the massacre took place above, the blood of the victims running down on to them.



A monument erected in 1872 commemorates the massacre of the Indians, on a c. 1910 postcard. The tribute stands in the village of Gnadenhutzen on the site of the original mission town. Both private collection.

Finally, one of the boys managed to force his way through an air hole at the back of the wall and escaped. The other boy, being larger, could not fit through the opening and was burned alive when the cabin was destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

Over the next few weeks, no other survivors returned to rejoin the missionaries or their fellow tribesman. As the bodies of the slain were so badly burned and intermixed in the fires, no exact forensic account was made of their numbers when they were buried several years later in a mass grave at the massacre site. Except for the two boys mentioned, all those known to have returned to gather supplies were presumed to have perished at the hands of the militia.

Reaction to the massacre in both white society and in Indian country was oddly the same. Even whites who may have shared some of the sentiments of the militiamen recognized the extreme barbarity of the act and the consequences it would no doubt bring to Euro-American settlers who had no hand in it. For Indians already aligned with the British, it confirmed their opinions of the Americans, and those who had held some sense of neutrality now saw the conflict from a different

An early 19th-century depiction of the massacre titled, *The Moravian Indian Martyrs*.

perspective. Few of the men who participated in the massacre—or their children or grandchildren—would even acknowledge their presence at the act. For the last hundred years, historians have struggled to even reconstruct a muster roll of the soldiers and their officers involved. Not all the militiamen needed to hide in complete shame. It was reported that about 18 of the roughly 200 participants had voted against the reprisal and had separated themselves from the others, yet only a handful of them are known by name today.<sup>5</sup>

Factual history always seems to hold more twists and surprises than the best novelists can imagine, and the Gnadenhütten massacre story, which appeared to have ended for all but two in 1782, has more to offer. During the 19th century, the family of one of the dissenters among the militiamen claimed that the 22-year-old Obadiah Holmes, Jr., had not only voted against the massacre, but had also “rescued at the risk of personal danger to himself from the high passions aroused in others and took home with him and reared and cared for him ten years, an Indian boy of seven years of age.”<sup>6</sup> Such a tale might easily be dismissed as that of a family trying to elevate their ancestor above the atrocity with which he was associated, but in recent years, evidence in support of this claim has surfaced.

In 1999, the diaries from the Moravian mission at Fairfield, on the Thames in Canada, were translated from German and published for the first time.<sup>7</sup> On August 31 of 1801, the mission diarist recorded:


An Indian came to visit today who had been captured by whites as a child and raised by them. He works in the service of a white man not far from here. He has wandered around for some time now looking for his people and thus came to our town. It turned out he is Benjamin, the son of Daniel and Johanne, who we thought had been killed on the Muskingum. His brothers



and sisters recognized him by two scars, one above the eye and one on his leg. He has all but forgotten what happened to him immediately after his capture. He was baptized again by the whites and named John. He told us other children had survived (the massacre) who are still with white people today.

Benjamin eventually returned to living with the Moravians, but it appears that the missionaries did not believe he was a complete convert to the faith. When he died at age 40 in 1813, they noted that although he regularly attended meetings, “He did not recognize his natural depravity and did not know what a blessed sinner was. He died in this frame of mind after a short illness.” The entry at his death revealed one more key detail: “He was seven years old at the time of the infamous massacre. A white man hid him in the bush and saved his life.”<sup>8</sup>

This corroborating evidence from a previously unpublished source certainly appears to validate not only the story of Obadiah’s defiance of his more bloodthirsty neighbors and comrades, but also that

unnamed others did likewise. Due to the identical ages and congruent stories, perhaps it was even Benjamin himself who was raised by Holmes as “John.” Obadiah remained in Western Pennsylvania, passing away in Pittsburgh in 1834. 

<sup>1</sup> Some sources give the total killed as 96.

<sup>2</sup> Paul A.W. Wallace, *The Travels Of John Heckewelder In Frontier America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 192-194.

<sup>3</sup> James Taylor Holmes, *The American Family of Rev. Obadiah Holmes* (Columbus, 1915), 199.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace, *The Travels Of John Heckewelder*, 195.

<sup>5</sup> A recent well-researched attempt to compile a comprehensive list of all of those militiamen on the campaign was done by George C. Williston. It can be accessed at: <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gwilli824/moravian.html>. Williston lists other potential dissenters as David Williamson, James Taylor, Thomas Orr, Edward Christy, Jacob Miller, and Robert Marshall.

<sup>6</sup> Holmes, *The American Family*, 169.

<sup>7</sup> Sue Goehring, who at the time was the site director at Schoenbrunn State Memorial in New Philadelphia, Ohio, first told the author about the Fairfield diary entries related to the survivors of the massacre.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Dabthly-Judd, trans., *Moravians In Upper Canada: The Diary Of The Mission Of Fairfield On The Thames 1792-1813* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1999), 239, 490-491.